IN THE WILDERNESS

At Nelkan we were at the last outpost of civilization. The village consisted of a dozen log houses. Two of these were substantial cottages occupied by local merchants; two, smaller buildings—one for the school, the other for the priest—if one came. The only other structures were primitive log cabins and barns. The village also had a cemetery with a tiny chapel.

Nelkan was the terminal point of navigation on the Maya and the beginning of a winter trail across the Dzhugzhur, to the port of Ayan on the Okhotsk Sea. The main traffic was in Japanese tea, delivered from Okhotsk on reindeer in the winter and floated in boats and on rafts to Yakutsk in the spring. Transportation over the mountains was in the hands of nomadic Tungus. Each fall, with the first snow, they went down to Ayan with their reindeer and sledges, took the freight to Nelkan, returned for a new cargo, and thus traveled back and forth until the spring thawed the snow. There were three passes over the mountains, each used for eight or ten years and then abandoned for fifteen or twenty.

It was raining in Nelkan, and while we waited for the weather to clear we got ready for the journey. Filipov, the bigger of the two Nelkan merchants, gave us a barn for quarters and offered to help us plan the expedition. He had crossed the range several times, always in winter. With his aid, I made a rough map of the route, somewhat similar to the log of the Lena captain. I tried to mark the trail with the ravines, marshes, and rivers it crossed, and to sketch signs that would help us recognize different points—peaks on the horizon, unusual boulders, occasionally a cross beside the trail, traces of an old camp, and the like. It seemed to be about 175 miles from Nelkan to the Okhotsk Sea and the trip might take about fourteen days. Meanwhile Mikhail bought a pack horse and replenished our provisions. The problem of provisions seemed very important, because local people could not tell us whether we could rely on hunting and fishing at this season.

We spent the last evening at Filipov's house. He had been in Irkutsk several times and knew the Lena like the palm of his hand. His house was furnished with stuffed armchairs, woolen curtains, and bearskins. The living room featured a phonograph with a huge pink and green horn ornamented with yellow roses.

We were treated to a tasty fish pie. The merchant's wife, a six-foot Amazon with huge hands and feet, seemed unhappy until she could make us take a third helping.

"Did you see movies?" she asked us. "I was in the theater in Yakutsk